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ABSTRACT

There is virtue in the movement recently begun within academic discourse that moves personal expression into professional writing. But before academics can understand why it works, they must first acknowledge that at times it does not work. A case in point would be Jane Tompkins' essay, "Me and My Shadow," which is predicated on a metaphoric split between a professional and personal voice. The essay is not a good example of the personal essay because the dichotomy it sets up between the personal and the professional is false: the personal "Jane" is no more real than the "professional" Jane. Further, the negative, destructive criticism of the "professional" Jane is not necessarily the result of being professional; other feminists have responded professionally and theoretically but in more constructive and instructive modes. In the best criticism the personal elements are brought to bear on the professional--illuminating, provoking, challenging, and forcing the articulation of the professional. One example would be Terry Tempest Williams' "The Clan of One-Breasted Women." It is a personal essay, a piece of family history, an impressive example of archival research, and a powerful argument against nuclear testing in the Utah desert. An academic example would be Patricia Williams' "Death of the Profane: A Commentary on the Genre of Legal Writing." Besides being a commentary on legal writing as a genre it is an analysis, evaluation, and critique of the discourse of law review. (TB)

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Getting Personal in Academic Discourse: Why It Works
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1987: Jane Tompkins publishes "Me and My Shadow," officially an NLH article responding to Ellen Messer-Davidow's "The Philosophical Bases of Literary Criticisms," actually a rebellion against the constrictions of academic discourse and a personal account of Tompkin's refusal to write theory any more.[1]

1989: Mike Rose publishes Lives on the Boundary, a combination of "autobiography, case study, commentary" (8), an interweaving of personal narrative and professional reflection on, as Rose puts it, his "journey from the high school vocational track up through the lattice work of the American university" (8) [2]

1989: Terry Tempest Williams publishes "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" in Witness magazine, an article that challenges the U.S. government's account of the dangers and damages of nuclear testing in Utah by recounting her family history, the stories of her mother, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters--all victims of breast cancer, all now dead but one after grueling and gruesome mastectomies.[3]

1991: Patricia J. Williams, a black scholar from Columbia Law School, publishes "Death of the Profane" [in The Alchemy of Race and Rights], an essay that juxtaposes a personal account of being shut out of a Benetton store with two other versions of her experience, one published in a law review, the other in a newspaper, all three together showing the powerful difference among forms of discourse, all three used by Williams to analyze how official, "objective" forms omit or elide or avoid fundamental issues of race.[4]

What is this phenomenon we are witnessing--in journalism and law, in literary criticism and composition studies ? Is it a new genre, an innovative and successful pushing of the academic boundaries, what Nancy Miller calls "autobiography as cultural criticism"?[5] Or is it just Moi criticism, as Lingua Franca calls it, just the exhibitionism of a bunch of

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middle-aged academics who have gotten bored with writing the theoretical criticism that brought them their fame? Is it in fact an old, well-established non-fictional genre, going at least as far back as the founding of Harper's Magazine in the late 19th-century as Don McQuade has suggested, a genre that uses the personal as evidence, that recognizes personal narrative as relevant to, if often critically, the larger public narratives we live by? Or is this phenomenon just egotism on display, an abandonment of scholarly discpline for "self-indulgent pap,"[6] the soft, touchy-feely ease of autobiographical anecdote?

Let's admit the negative side before turning to that part of my paper before the colon, the "Why It Works." Let me be negative and tell you why I think Jane Tompkins' essay is a bad model for the personal in professional writing, why I think it doesn't work, then why I think (and feel) that other models--say TTW from journalism or PW from law--are better models for composition studies. I realize that Tompkins' article has generated a lot of discussion among feminist critics about the issue of authority: If we as women speak personally, won't we undermine our authority? won't we fall once again into the dichotomy of masculine=public and rational vs. feminine=private and emotional?[7] That's an issue perhaps, but I want to think instead about the way Tompkins configures the personal and the professional and the way she uses personal and professional voices in the course of her essay. The terms are split, separate, antithetical,

dichtomized, not brought to bear on each other--as they are, I will argue, in the best personal criticism.

First there's the title of the essay: "Me and My Shadow." "Me": implying a real me, a real person, a subject versus "My shadow": implying a not me, a dark side, an imperfect or distorted reflection. At first glance, I wasn't sure which was the "me," which was the "shadow"--the personal voice or the professional one; couldn't it be either? In the course of the essay, however, it becomes clear that the "me" is the person who feels straight-jacketed by theory, who sits at her desk refusing to write professional criticism, who thinks about

> the birds outside my window, my grief over Janice, just myself as a person sitting here in stocking feet, a little bit chilly because the windows are open, and thinking about going to the bathroom. But not going yet. (126)

The professional Tompkins is the shadow, the dark side, the voice that writes a nasty critique of Messer-Davidow's definition of epistemology, the voice that can only quarrel with and deconstruct a friend's writing.

This dichotomy is underwritten by a dominant metaphor in the essay, the figure of "two voices," at least as old as Tennyson's poem of 1833 by the same title, positing a negative and positive voice, a voice of despair vs. one of hope. In Tompkin's words:

> There are two voices inside me. . . . One is the voice of the critic who wants to correct a mistake in the essay's view of epistemology. The other is the voice of a person who wants to write about her feelings. (122)

Well, so what? If an academic feels split, why shouldn't she write about it? Why treat Tompkins' essay as a bad example of personal criticism? For just this reason: That the dichotomy of the title is false; the "personal" Jane is no more real than the "shadow," "professional" Tompkins. And for this reason: The negative, destructive criticism of the "professional" Tompkins is not necessarily a result of being professional; other feminists have responded professionally and theoretically (in the same New Literary History volume that Tompkins essay appeared in) but in more constructive and instructive modes. And for this reason: That the essay implies that everyone has a "personal" voice, that if one just takes off the "straitjacket" the personal voice will emerge--naturally, inevitably (an assumption about voice that writing teachers who teach the personal essay could quickly dismantle). And for this reason: That the personal elements in the essay are not brought to bear on the professional; the personal details--like watching the squirrels or mourning a death or going to the bathroom--remain random, irrelevant, just as the personal and professional are kept separate, in suspension, as if they do not, could not, mutually illumine. But especially for this reason: that the personal "voice" has nothing to say about the professional issue.

Yet in the best of personal criticism, it does. The personal illumines, provokes, comments on, adds to, challenges, forces the articulation of the professional. The turn to the personal is not an abandonment of the

professional, but is rather an acknowledgment that professional discourse is always subject to change, open to challenge, in need of innovation--innovation which might come from what we happen to label a "personal" form of discourse. Both personal and professional are constructions, forms of discourse able to do some things, not others.

Take the example of "The Clan of One-Breasted Women" by Terry Tempest Williams. It is a personal essay, a piece of family history, an impressive example of archival research, and a powerful argument against nuclear testing in the Utah desert. It is certainly personal; it is certainly professional. Williams explains the literal meaning of her title in the opening paragraph: The women in her family suffer from breast cancer and the mastectomies that frequently, almost inevitably, result.[8] She uses personal experience to introduce her subject as she describes a recurring dream, "a flash of light in the night in the desert," a dream which turns out to be historical fact, the testing of an atomic bomb in the Mojave desert on September 7, 1957. Williams also uses objective data--professional research--to construct a history of atomic testing in the southwestern United States, a history that begins in the 1950's and ends with January, 1988, when the Supreme Court refused to hear a case about government responsibility for the illness and death suffered by Utah inhabitants who became victims of those tests. She interweaves personal testimony and public history; she uses personal and familial experience

to challenge public history. And as she does so, she self-consciously embraces alternative rhetorical traditions: as in her appropriation of women's myths, such as the myth of female Amazons, one-breasted warriors; or in her decision to write the memoirs of female relatives who have suffered and died, and to name the nameless in a catalog of women victims, [Diane Dixon Tempest, Lettie Romney Dixon, Kathryn Blackett Tempest]; or, in her borrowing from the rhetorical traditions of Native American women who, as they protest at a military base, sing "a song given to them by Shoshoni grandmothers"; or, in her decision to argue against nuclear testing not in traditional, agonistic modes but by indirection and narrative, parody and irony, anecdote and song. The argument against nuclear testing ends with a personal story:

> As one officer cinched the handcuffs around my wrists, another frisked my body. She found a pen and a pad of paper tucked inside my left book.
> "And these?' she sternly asked.
> "Weapons," I replied.
> Our eyes met. I smiled.

This technique is not an abandonment of the public and professional but a recognition that there are alternative modes of knowing, writing, protesting. Williams knows how to situate her own voice among them.

Or, to give an academic example, take Patricia Williams' "Death of the Profane," subtitled "A Commentary on the Genre of Legal Writing." In a way, the subtitle tells it all. Williams recounts an experience--exasperating, humiliating, enraging--of being kept out of a store two weeks before Christmas because a young clerk refuses to answer the buzzer,

fearing a black face (her face) that might rob or steal or otherwise disrupt business. But Williams purpose is not autobiographical narrative, as the subtitle makes clear. This is a "commentary" on legal writing as a genre--an analysis, evaluation, a critique of the discourse of the law review. One of the points Williams makes is that professional legal discourse can't--or won't--allow the expression of certain versions of her experience or specific articulations of the issues.

For example, when her account is edited by the law review, her rage is cut out, "reduced to simple declarative sentences" (47). Her use of active personal voice is "inverted in favor of the passive impersonal" (47). In the second edit, all references to Benetton's are deleted "because, according to the editors and faculty adviser, it was defamatory" (47). When she offers to write footnote "to attest to this as [her] personal experience at one particular location," the editors tell her that "they [are] not in the habit of publishing things that [are] unverifiable" (47). And when Williams receives the final page proofs, she discovers that "all reference to [her] race ha[ve] been eliminated because it was against 'editorial policy' to permit descriptions of physiognomy" (47). Surely this is personal experience and personal voice coming head on with professional discourse and its epistemological framework.

And that is the point of Patricia Williams' essay--the confrontation of the personal with the professional and

public. By "confrontation" I do not mean simply the autobiographical experience of being shut out of Benneton's, but more importantly, the emotional, psychological, and intellectual process of coming to understand the status of the personal within legal thinking and writing. As Williams analyzes her experience--not just the Benneton's shut-out, but also the writing of a law-review article and the writing of a speech for a law conference--she sees (and makes her readers see) that the personal is not recognized in law as a "primary resource"; in the hierarchy of evidence and citation, a newspaper article written by someone else about her and her experience has "more authoritative weight" than her own account, "the unverifiable testimony of my speech" (50).

That hierarchy is what the essay means to challenge: What does it mean--Why is it--that legal discourse shuns active voice, discounts an individual person's experience, treats Williams' footnote as "unverifiable testimony"? Can a form of writing be brought to bear on this hierarchy, disrupt it, perhaps even change it? Patricia Williams, like Terry Tempest Williams, mounts the challenge with success because she understands that the issue is not just having the experience or telling about it, not just putting a personal anecdote into a professional article or including some literal--that is, spatial, chronological, or descriptive--location of the self as writer, but rather that the issue is thinking and speaking through and about the modes of the

personal and the professional, thinking about their sites of confluence and conflict, speaking through their different modes for a fuller understanding of the issues.

Let me end with an example from a well-known figure in composition studies. In the "Preface" to Lives on the Boundary, Rose makes this statement: "In trying to present the cognitive and social reality of such a life [in the educational underclass]--the brains as well as the heart of it--I have written a personal book. The stories of my own work with literacy interweave with the story of my own engagement with language. Lives on the Boundary is both vignette and commentary, reflection and anlysis. I didn't know how else to get it right" (xi-xii). I hope Mike will allow me to make two summary remarks with his words: (1) Personal criticism only makes sense with the last condition obtains, when there is no other way to get it right. (2) Personal criticism only works when there is an interweaving of forms, to use Mike's gentle metaphor, when the strands or threads are brought into contact, even if at seeming cross purposes as woof and warp that produce a larger pattern.

Notes

[1]"Me and My Shadow," New Literary History 19 (Autumn 1987); rpt. in Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism, ed. Linda Kauffman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 121-39.

[2]Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared (New York: Macmillan, 1989).

[3]"The Clan of One-Breasted Women," Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place (New York: Pantheon Books, 1991); originally appeared in Witness (Winter 1989).

[4]"The Death of the Profane (a commentary on the genre of legal writing)," in The Alchemy of Race and Rights (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), pp. 44-51, 242-43.

[5]"Nancy K. Miller, "Getting Personal: Autobiography as Cultural Criticism," in Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 1-30.

[6]Sandy Petrey's phrase, quoted by Miller, p. xix.

[7]Tompkins raises this issue at the beginning of her essay as the "public-private dichotomy, which is to say, the public-private hierarchy that is a founding condition" (pp. 122-23) and Miller challenges the dichotomy usefully (and Tompkins' assumption that we must do one or the other) in "Getting Personal," pp. 5-9.

[8]Her title also alludes, of course, to the mythological tribe of women warriors, the Amazons, who according to some legends cut off their right breasts in order to wield their bows and arrows more freely. It is, in one sense, about how women should act when they face an injustice--in this case, the injustice of being victims of US nuclear testing in Utah.

It is an essay about appropriate feminist modes of fighting injustice--

kai logoi kai ergoi, as they say in Greek, in words and in deeds.